FIRST FRIDAY CLUB - DECEMBER 5, 1997

Al Gustavson's invitation had to do with The Wall Street Journal article about religion and money and the sermon: Money and Meaning

Jacob Needham – book by that title

JN says what many are saying (Robert Withnow) et. Al.

1. Money is important (best line "Show me the money)

2. How we get it and use it defines who we are

3. Expresses our ultimate values and commitments more than anything

* Your credo is written in your check style *

Insurance commercial – Jack Benny impersonator, cheapskate
Rainy night – man accosted by mugger
"Your money or your life!"
Silence
Repeat
"I'm thinking it over."

When we finally arranged date, it was December, so Al said "Talk about money and Christmas – not hard."

After all, money is what this is about.

70-80 % of retail business between Thanksgiving and Christmas

Make or break time

Gorgeous – lights/decorations

Michigan Avenue crowded

Saxophonist – ten years

Winter Wonderland – at Water Tower

Elf at Drake giving Tribune and Frango Mints. Why? It's the season for giving.

In the midst of it, something important – it has to do not so much with money – only peripherally – and everything in the world to do with giving and receiving.

So let's thank –

[If you are fortunate – someone once taught you to give and to receive –

I recall it well. I was about 11 or 12, I suppose. My mother had taken my brother and me to do our Christmas shopping, a fairly simple procedure: big blue work handkerchiefs and razor blades for Dad; inexpensive scarf or department store perfume for Mother. What Dad really wanted, we all knew, was a new pocket watch. He was a railroader and a good pocket watch was standard equipment. I have recalled the memories of that pocket watch, which he used to pull from his vest and wind loudly in church when he decided the preacher had gone on long enough, to my mother's horror and my delight.

Mother had found just the right pocket watch. It was in a jewelry store I had never seen before, on the second floor of a bank building. It was elegant. There was a dark blue carpet all the way up the stairs, and the owner, Mr. Sellers, a very distinguished man about town, waited on us. He knew my mother's name. I was impressed. The object of our search was in the glass case. We looked at it. Mr. Sellers took it out of the case, placed it on a piece of felt on the counter, showed it to us and carefully opened the back to display the works which he assured us were fine. It was expensive. Mother told him we'd have to think about it some more. So down the stairs we went, out onto the sidewalk and she called a conference. "How much money do you have?" she asked me. I had a paper route so I had a few dollars. "And how much do you have?" she asked my little brother who produced a handful of loose change from his pocket.

"Good," she said, as she took two or three dollars from me and some loose change from my brother. "Now we have enough." Up the blue carpeted stairs we went. Mr. Sellers was waiting for us and we bought the watch!

What excitement! What anticipation! What an adventure! We could hardly wait for Christmas morning to give it to him. I have since concluded that Mother orchestrated the whole thing. Of course, she didn't need our two dollars and change. What a gift she gave us by teaching us a precious lesson about the joy of giving: that the gifts of Christmas are to be given as well as received.

One of the most beloved Christmas stories of all is<u>Gifts of the Magi</u> by O. Henry, which was the pen name of William Sydney Porter, a turn-of-the-century American author.

The story is about Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young, Jim and Della, in their early twenties, trying to make a go of it in an inexpensive and shabby flat in New York. Mr. Dillingham's wages have just been cut. It's Christmas. Della has managed to save $1.87 to buy a present for her husband. Jim has no money to buy a present for her...

> "Now there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair.
>
> "Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry and mocked at Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy."

On the very day Della acknowledged the fact that her paltry savings were not going to provide much of a gift for her husband, she stood looking at herself in the mirror, her beautiful hair cascading down, and she made an inspired and fateful decision. She ran to a hair goods shop and impulsively sold her hair for $20.00.

"Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present....

"She found it at last. It surely had been made for him and no one else. There was none other like it in any of the stores. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value.... As soon as she saw it, she knew that it must be Jim's."

The watch chain cost $21.00 and she hurried home with her treasure.

She tried to repair the damage her generosity had caused by curling the little hair left on her head and prepared dinner, eagerly awaiting Jim's return, worried now about his reaction to her new look.

When Jim arrived, he stopped, stared at her – stunned. "Your hair," he said. "It's gone."

"Yes," Della said. "It's sold and gone."

"Out of his trance, Jim seemed to quickly wake .... Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table...."

Della tore at the string and paper – her cry of joy changed to tears....

"For there lay The Combs – the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims – just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. There were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

"But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

"Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull, precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit...

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

"Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell, said he, let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs...." [Jack Newcomb, editor, A Christmas Treasury, p. 209-213]

There is required, I have observed, both art and science in the giving of gifts and in the receiving of gifts. The brilliance of O. Henry's story is that Jim and Della have both. They know how to give and they know how to receive.

Children, I think sometimes, are born with the instinct. A few days before Christmas, I was talking to Carolyn on the telephone. Carolyn will be three in January. She lives in Texas and she is my granddaughter. "What do you want for Christmas, Carolyn?" I asked. "It's a secret," she said. And then, whispering, "But we sent you a book and some underwear...." Don't tell," she added. She had all the pieces of the ritual, I concluded. She simply had them in the wrong sequence. Carolyn had more art than science, but her instincts are excellent.

It is very big business – gift giving is. We spend an enormous amount of time, energy and creativity, not to mention money, on Christmas gifts.

Retailers makes it or don't make it for the year based on sales in the last four weeks. And all of it is an expanded variation on a theme first sounded 2000 years ago when Magi – The Three Wise Men of tradition – arrived to pay homage to a newborn infant and gave him precious gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They are intriguing characters in the nativity. The were astrologers and their story has been amplified by art, music, legend and religious myth over the centuries.

Magi were the first century equivalent of consultants. Kings called on them regularly before mounting military campaigns. Businessmen asked their advice before investing. Families of means hired them to consult on matters of marriage and romance.

So when astrologers in the East observe a new phenomenon in the heavens, they set out to discover the event it signaled, in all probability the birth of a new king. The Adler Planetarium will tell you about the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn at the time – if you need a little science. And they did the logical thing: they called on Herod – King of the Jews – in his enormous palace in Jerusalem, asking if a new king had been born. Herod was a great king, one of history's most productive builders. He constructed whole cities, the mammoth harbor at Caesarea, a series of huge and palatial fortresses from one end of the land to the other.
He was also incredibly cruel. In order to consolidate his political position, Herod had murdered members of his own family. When the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, heard about it he said, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son."

When Herod hears the question about a new king, he convenes the religious authorities and says in effect: "Let's suppose that the Messiah, the one who will come to the throne of David (the one I'm sitting on, by the way) came – now. Where would he likely be born?" And the religious authorities, with embarrassing naiveté, tell him, quoting a little Scripture: "And you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come a ruler."

And so, it was Herod who pointed the Magi toward Bethlehem and off they go looking, I suppose, for the newest baby and when they find

him, when they see the child, they do the most astonishing thing – they give him wonderful gifts.

There is art in the receiving of gifts. I used to wonder what Mary and Joseph did with the gold, frankincense and myrrh, not exactly baby gifts, and decided that they used it to buy a few camels for the long trip down to Egypt. Of one thing I'm certain and that is that Mary did not say what you and I sometimes say when we are given a wonderfully generous gift – "Oh, you shouldn't have done that."

What a peculiar and significant thing to say.

John Steinbeck observed that:

> "It is so easy to give, so exquisitely rewarding. Receiving, on the other hand, if it is well done, requires a fine balance of self-knowledge and kindness. It requires humility and tact...." [New York Times Magazine, 12-24-95]

It is more blessed to give than to receive, Jesus said, and most of us have discovered that. But we also know that it is, in some ways, easier, and that we are better at giving than receiving.

We know people to whom it is impossible to give anything, even a compliment. "You look nice today" – "No I don't, I look awful." "That's a pretty coat" – "No, it's an old one."

The treat theologian, Karl Barth, thought it was a spiritual problem. Barth used to preach almost every Sunday morning in the city jail in Basel. And in one memorable Christmas sermon, he said:

> "We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." [Deliverance to the Captives, p. 40]

I've never heard Carolyn say, "Oh, you shouldn't have, Granddaddy." But I've said it and wished I hadn't. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist who did pioneering work in religion and psychology, observed that even though the Christian church has been

proclaiming the free grace of God for 20 centuries, a stronger message is:

> "the psychological attitude, the idea deeply ingrained in the heart – that everything must be paid for." [Guilt and Grace, p. 174]

Tournier thinks that when we say "You shouldn't have," we may be saying, "I don't want to be obligated to you." "I don't want to have to respond to your generosity." We may be saying, "I don't want to get this close." And we may be saying, "I really don't feel like I deserve this. I'm not good enough for this gift."

All of which is confounded and overcome and overwhelmed by Christmas, by what the Magi saw when they arrived – a child – God's love and grace given absolutely, utterly, with no conditions, no strings attached, no deserving to be earned, no correctness to be achieved: just a gift, an absolutely gracious gift of love .... To which the only plausible possible response is to receive it, to hold it tightly and to say "thank you" – and to open your heart and your hands and give whatever you have.

So, in these lovely quieter days of Christmastide, ponder the gifts you gave others and the gifts you received. Ponder how much of yourself you gave and how much of those precious others: your beloveds, were given humbly and genuinely and extravagantly to you. Ponder and be grateful.

O. Henry concluded:

> "The Magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And her I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were of the wisest. Of

all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi."